

**EMPOWERING THE POWERFUL: A CRITICAL  
DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON  
GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY**

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**BY**

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# **EMPOWERING THE POWERFUL: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY**

## **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the issue of graduate employability in Malaysia as construed in public discourse in English, a language of power in Malaysia. The term employability itself has many definitions depending on the requirements of government and industry, and in the case of Malaysia, the English-language ability of graduates is inseparable from graduate employability. Data were collected from three socially significant English-language publications: a mainstream newspaper (the *New Straits Times*), an alternative newspaper (*The Malaysian Insider*), and a government document outlining the national approach to improving graduate employability in universities (the *Graduate Employability Blueprint*). The data were collected between 2012 and 2013, a significant two-year period of time due to the publication of the *Graduate Employability Blueprint* in 2012, and the five-yearly Malaysian General Election in 2013.

Applying Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995), the study employs Transitivity analysis (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) and Appraisal analysis (Martin & White, 2005) from Systemic Functional Linguistics. The analysis looks at the grammatical roles and evaluation of important social actor groups in the graduate employability issue (e.g. government, government link companies, employers, graduates, parents and teachers). The findings show that government, the government programs and the employers are construed favourably, while the graduates are depicted unfavourably. Parents and teachers are largely excluded from the discourse.

Significant government expenditure and national resources from public and private organizations are dedicated to improving the employability of graduates in Malaysia. However,

the public discourse on graduate employability in the powerful English language appears unlikely to contribute to a social context where the aims of the groups with a key interest in graduate employability will be achieved.



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# CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND

## 1.0 Introduction

*Every year about 180,000 students graduate with diplomas and degrees from institutions of higher learning. To assist unemployed graduates, the Government will launch the Graduate Employability Blueprint by end-2012. The Blueprint will focus on strengthening the employability of graduates. In this regard, the Government will establish the Graduate Employability Taskforce with an allocation of RM200 million.*

*Najib Razak (2012)*

The above excerpt, from the Prime Minister's speech during the Malaysian National Budget, tabled in 2012, is an illustration of graduate employability becoming a contentious issue in Malaysia. Graduate employability as a social issue that involves many global and local stakeholders and actors, including governments, employers, businesses, students and academic associations, professional governing bodies, and the media. The discussion of employability now revolves around higher education institutions' strategic partnerships with industry, collaborations across institutions, and government funding to improve the marketability of unemployed graduates and future graduates. Therefore, this thesis reports on research into the public discourse of graduate employability as played out in the Malaysian English-language mass media (represented by two online newspapers), and the English-language discourse of Malaysian government institutions (represented by the government's Graduate Employability Blueprint). This chapter provides the background and context of the issue of graduate employability, how it accelerated in the news, and how this led to the launching of the Graduate Employability Blueprint (henceforth GEB) mentioned in the Prime Minister's speech.

## 1.1 What is Employability?

The term 'employability' is used widely by scholars, government, and industry, and there has been a range of research conducted on graduate employability in the Malaysian context (Mustafa et al., 2008; Yusof, 2008; Yuzainee, Zaharim, & Omar, 2011; Azami Zaharim, Ahmad, Yusoff, Omar, & Basri, 2012). Employability refers to specific skills required by employers, including specific sets of knowledge, abilities and attitudes that fulfil job requirements (Gracia, 2009). The concept of employability skills was initiated by educators, primarily those working on programs specifically designed to facilitate employment (Harvey, 2001).

Employability is clearly a complex mixture of elements. These elements may differ from job to job but the basic outcome is the same: they make a person a useful and therefore desirable employee (Saterfiel & McLarty, 1995). According to Hillage and Pollard (1998), these elements represent employers' expectations of graduates that they possess technical and discipline competences from their degrees, and also the requirement that graduates demonstrate a range of broader skills and attributes that includes teamwork, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving and managerial abilities. However, this employment scenario has changed dramatically as a number of employers have begun assessing the foundational skills of (potential) employees, primarily in reading, communication and mathematics (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011). Clearly, the higher the employability skills held by a person, the higher chances of him/her being employed, and of maintaining a job (Hillage & Pollard, 1998).

In Malaysia, employability means that graduates not only have technical skills but also the skills of communication, teamwork, critical thinking and problem solving, life-long learning, information management, entrepreneurship, ethics, and moral and professional leadership (MOHE, 2006). Furthermore, the term 'employability' in Malaysia is now almost synonymous with 'English communication skills', since academic and political debates in Malaysia have

always associated English proficiency with the issues of graduate unemployment, soft skills deficiencies, and the need for unemployed graduates to be retrained (N. A. Ismail, 2011; Noor Azina, 2011; Yusof, 2008).

On the other hand, the mass media as a tool of ideology dissemination has also altered and moulded society's perspective on graduate and related issues. The present study aims to investigate the issues of 'English ability' and 'graduate employability' in Malaysia as represented in English-language newspaper discourse and in government documents, in order to further our understanding of the public discourse on this important social issue, and the influence of such discourse on government policy and funding, and on the related practices of industry and institutions of higher learning (IHL) in Malaysia.

## **1.2 Graduate Employability Issue in Malaysia**

### **1.2.0 Introduction**

Before 2010, the level of graduate unemployment was still manageable, but increased as years passed by. By 2010, the Graduate Tracer Study, conducted by the Ministry of Education, revealed that more than 30% of graduates were unable to secure a job due to poor communication skills and skills mismatch (Education, 2012). The graduate employability issue has affected institutions of higher learning (IHL) in Malaysia since at least the time of the Graduate Tracer Study (GTS). The government, concerned with the issue, implemented intervention programs by spending extra capital to enhance graduate employability. Furthermore, the debates around graduate employability issues were further exacerbated when the Department of Statistics Malaysia revealed that about 28,000 to 34,000 graduates from the year 2008 – 2010 had failed to secure employment even two years after graduation (*Graduate Tracer Study Supplementary Data*, 2010).

One motivating factor for the government intervention was the Vision 2020 project, envisioned by the previous Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed, which encouraged Malaysia to become a member of the global economy and community (Jeshurun, 1993). The Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006) had also envisioned that human capital would be the most critical element in achieving the national mission. The unemployed-graduates issue would affect the nation's growth towards Vision 2020, so graduate employability was seen not only as an issue affecting unemployed university graduates but the society and nation as well. One of the ways to facilitate the graduates was by appointing government-linked companies to conduct specific courses - especially soft-skills courses - and on-the-job training for unemployed graduates. Certain incentives were also given to the unemployed graduates and the government-linked companies who participated in the programs (EPU, 2013).

This issue of graduate employability involves a range of social actors and the relations between them. For example, this issue goes to the social roles, social status and social mobility of the graduates and their relations to employers, the universities and their relation to employers, and to the government and their relation to everyone. If graduates are not employable, there is a significant personal cost on an individual and family level (of lost income and potential related social problems), and also a significant social and economic cost to employers and the nation.

In the next sections of this chapter, programs planned and executed by the government in enhancing graduate employability are compared and discussed. Also discussed are the management of the graduate employability issue in the Malaysian setting through the implementation of soft skills modules in syllabi and research on graduate employability conducted in Malaysia.

### 1.2.1 Soft Skills Introduction in the Syllabus

One approach to enhancing graduate employability was the introduction of soft skills modules, which focussed on graduating students with attributes necessary for the workplace, based on the National Higher Education Plan (2007-2010). The Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (MOHE) recommended that all public institutions incorporate soft skills training into their curricula. The MOHE (2006) identified seven soft skills, which were divided into 34 sub-soft skills, that university students were expected to acquire in the *Module Pembangunan Kemahiran Insaniah untuk Institusi Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia* (Soft skills development module for Malaysian institutions of higher learning).

The first category presents the soft skills every student must possess, and the second category outlines soft skills that are good to have. The first skills, which also implies the most important skills, that graduates should possess to be employable are communication skills. Students are not only required to communicate effectively in their first language but also in English as second language and lingua franca in the globalized world. Therefore, even though 'English' is not explicitly listed, a low competency in English represents a lack of communication skills (see Section 1.1 above and Chapter 2 below for further discussion).

Table 1.1 presents the soft skills as outlined by the MOHE in facilitating tertiary-level students to enhance employability.

Table 1.1: The elements of soft skills (Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia, 2006)

<b>SOFT SKILLS</b>	<b>MUST HAVE ELEMENTS (SUB-SKILLS)</b>	<b>GOOD TO HAVE ELEMENTS (SUB-SKILLS)</b>
<b>COMMUNICATION SKILLS</b>	<p>Ability to deliver ideas clearly, effectively and with confidence, either orally or in writing</p> <p>Ability to practise active listening skills and respond</p> <p>Ability to present clearly and confidently to the audience</p>	<p>Ability to use technology during presentation</p> <p>Ability to discuss and arrive at a consensus</p> <p>Ability to communicate with individuals from a different cultural background</p> <p>Ability to expand one's own communicative skill</p> <p>Ability to use non-oral skills</p>
<b>CRITICAL THINKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS</b>	<p>Ability to identify and analyse problems in difficult situations and make justifiable evaluations</p> <p>Ability to expand and improve thinking skills such as explanation, analysis and evaluate discussion</p> <p>Ability to find ideas and look for alternative solutions</p>	<p>Ability to think beyond</p> <p>Ability to make conclusions based on valid proof</p> <p>Ability to withstand and give full responsibility</p> <p>Ability to understand and accommodate oneself to the varied environment</p>
<b>TEAMWORK</b>	<p>Ability to build a good rapport, interact and work effectively with others</p> <p>Ability to understand and play the role of a leader and follower alternatively</p> <p>Ability to recognize and respect others' attitudes, behaviour and beliefs.</p>	<p>Ability to give contributions to planning and coordinate group work</p> <p>Responsible towards group decisions</p>
<b>LIFE-LONG LEARNING &amp; INFORMATION MANAGEMENT SKILLS</b>	<p>Ability to find and manage relevant information from various sources</p> <p>Ability to receive new ideas to perform autonomous learning</p>	<p>Ability to develop an inquiring mind and seek knowledge</p>
<b>ENTREPRENEURSHIP SKILLS</b>	<p>Ability to identify job opportunities</p>	<p>Ability to propose business opportunities</p> <p>Ability to build, explore and seek business opportunities and jobs</p> <p>Ability to be self-employed</p>
<b>ETHICS, MORALS AND PROFESSIONALISM</b>	<p>Ability to understand the economic crisis, environment and social-cultural aspects professionally</p> <p>Ability to analyse, and make problem-solving decisions related to ethics</p>	<p>Ability to practice ethical attitudes, besides having a responsibility towards society</p>
<b>LEADERSHIP SKILLS</b>	<p>Knowledge of the basic theories of leadership</p> <p>Ability to lead a project</p>	<p>Ability to understand and take turns as a leader and follower alternatively</p> <p>Ability to supervise members of the group</p>

Following these guidelines from MOHE, all academic programs and courses in universities would have to include the elements of soft skills. Other than embedding elements of soft skills



in the courses and programs, some universities went further by conducting 'Finishing Schools' under the scrutiny of the Students Development Centre in each institution of higher learning in Malaysia. According to Shakir (2009), who advocated for the Finishing School programs, these programs involved faculty identifying students who were severely lacking soft skills proficiency, and organizing special programs for these students. The program assisted the students to fully develop their soft skills in preparing them to face the competitive employment market. About the same time, studies were conducted that advocated the importance of soft skills or employability skills for graduates to survive and find employment that was, in terms of both the employers' and students' perceptions, commensurate with their qualifications (Devadason, Subramaniam, & Daniel, 2010; Husain, Mokhtar, Ahmad, & Mustapha, 2010; Shakir, 2009; Yusof, 2008). The soft skills module, as proposed and implemented in some universities in Malaysia, also projected communication in English as vital to employability (Yusof, 2008).

This relation between graduate employability and English-language education is discussed in detail in Chapter 2. For university students in Malaysia, English is a crucial subject. It is compulsory for all students to study English, many job advertisements specify a requirement for English-language ability, and many job interviews are conducted in English. For English-language teachers in Malaysian universities, graduate employability is a central concern in teaching, materials selection and development, curriculum development, and assessment, to the point where English for Specific Purposes (ESP) can be argued to be a disciplinary response to the issue of graduate employability, which emerged decades before the term 'graduate employability' was ever used.

Thus, the practices of English-language learning and teaching in Malaysian universities have long been closely related to issues of graduate employability (GE). Therefore, government policies on GE, and influential public discourse about GE, are a major concern for English-



language educators in Malaysian universities and for their students. Furthermore, the importance of the English language in Malaysia (Chapter 2) means that an understanding of English-language public discourse on graduate employability is of high importance. However, to date no such systematic study has been conducted.

### **1.2.2 Research on Employability in Education**

Research into graduate employability in education in the Malaysian setting has provided recommendations for improving graduate employability. According to UNESCO (2012), the issue of employability in Asia fluctuates according to the characteristics of graduates, which may or may not make them employable. Based on this report also, graduate employability in Malaysia depends on academic qualifications, skills, and competences that include communication skills and problem-solving skills. The Graduate Employability Blueprint (GEB) (2012) also depicts employers' complaints about graduates lacking interpersonal and communication skills. The government further extends the research on graduate employability with the assistance of the National Higher Education Research Institute (NAHERI) based in University Sains Malaysia (USM). The institute also assist the Ministry of Higher Education to design and implement new policies for higher learning institutions (NAHERI, 2015).

Bridgstock (2009) admits that, due to the growing demand of a global economy, universities have been pressured to produce employable graduates. In a study focused on the Australian context, Bridgstock proposes that graduate employability programs that emphasize individual skills and knowledge need to be complemented by targeted geographical and industry development, continuing (lifelong) education programs beyond university, and social inclusion initiatives, in order to be effective. In the case of graduate employability in Malaysia, the issue of graduate unemployment, according to the literature, has been concerned with communication skills as the prime factor, which reflects the recommendations by Bridgstock.

Singh et al. (2012), for instance, contend that Malaysian higher education institutions should be proactive in assessing students with different capabilities. In order to enhance graduate employability, they propose an approach focussed on assessment, and also that learning outcomes should widen the usage of the English language. There are also other studies that have advocated for English language as an important part of graduate employability (Nair–Venugopal, 2003; Shakir, 2009; Yusof, 2008; A. Zaharim et al., 2010). These studies also propose that, in order to fulfil employability requirements by industry, students need to be fluent in communication skills, especially in English. Pillai et al. (2012) state that enhancing soft skills through industrial training improves graduate employability, but that there are certain issues that Malaysian universities need to address, such as the possible mismatch between the tasks assigned to trainees and their areas of study, and the need to enhance English language competency and particular soft skills throughout their degree program. There have been many studies aiming to understand and improve graduate employability in Malaysia, as well as various programs planned and executed in the universities and sponsored by the government. For instance, the establishment of a government agency known as the Graduate Career Accelerated Program (GCAP), under the Prime Minister's Department, supports unemployed graduates. Two private-education centres appointed and linked with the government, Scicom Education Group and MyPartners, provides six weeks' training for unemployed graduates who have scored cumulative grade point averages of between 2.0 and 3.0. Upon completion of the training session, these firms assist graduates to find employment in the service sector, including commercial banks and multinational companies ("Govt training stint to help graduates get jobs," 2012). These examples above show that the issue of graduate employability has not been resolved, and continues to be discussed, especially in the media.

In 2012, the government published the Graduate Employability Blueprint as a policy for all Malaysian higher education institutions to follow in enhancing graduate employability. At the

same time, the connection between graduate employability and the English-language proficiency of graduates remains strong (Pillai, Khan, Ibrahim, & Raphael, 2012) and English remains a marker of social status and social power in Malaysia (Saran Kaur Gill, 2005). Therefore, it is timely that the graduate employability issue, as construed in the Malaysian English-language media and in important government documents that are also written in English, is studied in order to discover how the issue has been played out in Malaysian public discourse intended specifically for the educated and powerful (i.e. those in Malaysia who read English media and government documents). In the present study, critical discourse analysis using Systemic Functional Linguistics as an analytical tool is employed to examine the ways in which the graduate employability issue and relevant actors are represented in the media, as well as to explore the ways in which the issue and actors are evaluated and positioned in these influential discourses.

### **1.2.3 International Studies of Graduate Employability**

Graduate employability is a worldwide issue, and studies have been conducted in many countries to improve employability through better government policy (Morley, 2001); though studies of graduate employability issues in the UK (Helyer, 2007; Lindsay, 2007; Brown, 2004), Europe (Prokou, 2008; Schomburg & Teichler, 2011) and Australia (Bridgstock, 2009; Sheldon & Thornthwaite, 2005), for example, are more sporadic and detailed than those on the Malaysia context (see section 1.2.2 above).

Most current studies on employability deal with employability discourse and how transnational, national and local discourses on employability have been translated and re-shaped, and how they are manifested in different practices (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011). Due to the pressure of globalization, especially when local graduates are claimed to have low competence in English (Gill, 2005; Nair-Venugopal, 2001; Shakir, 2008), changes have been made in the Malaysian

national education plans to improve them in this respect. However, improvement on the English language policy is still considered necessary to some extent to achieve globalization (Saran Kaur Gill, 2005). In an example of this, Nuan (2011) proposes ideas and methods to improve graduate employability in China, particularly in a technical university. Some of the methods proposed by Nuan (2011) include focused career plans as anticipated by the university during the students' study years. However, the needs for graduates to be employable varies depending on the country's requirements of their workforce in preparing the nation (Bridgstock, 2009; Hamid, Islam, & Manaf, 2013).

Apart from a focused career plan, Tomlinson (2008), in an earlier study conducted in the UK, argued that personal, behavioural and social credentials are important in ensuring the employability of graduates, which he referred to as soft credentials. Students also need to understand that their future labour market outcomes are more complex and more competitive. This is in line with the graduate employability issue in the Malaysian setting, where the market outcomes are always in search for the best.

According to Brown et al. (2003) the major problem with research on employability issues is the lack of theoretically informed studies. Furthermore, they argue that the policy discourse regarding graduate employability is usually dominated by employer and government concerns about the supply of graduates. Their argument has yet to be proven in the Malaysian setting; but most programs aiming to enhance graduate employability in Malaysia have been planned and executed by government-linked companies (see section 1.3.1). On the other hand, Garsten et al. (2004) identified that employability is a matter of individual attributes and responsibility, which would place agency on the graduates and their ability.

One important contribution of the present thesis that it addresses the need for theoretically informed studies on graduate employability as identified by Brown et al. (2003). Another is to show that, in the Malaysian setting, employer and government concerns do receive more

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